

An Approach to E. M. Forster's A Passage to India

— Muddle or Mystery? —

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It is no doubt that A Passage to India is a modern classic and recently many various interpretations and evaluations have been published, especially, new critical studies by Indians themselves. A reason for the attention by Indians is that on the narrative level, the theme of this novel is the friendship between the English and the Indians. However, my present concern is on the symbolic level. From this perspective, the novel gives us a suggestion concerning the twentieth-century existential predicament--that is, the awareness of the inadequacy of rationality, but the very existence of the awareness itself being born of that rationality. Key words analyzed in this essay: muddle, mystery.

INTRODUCTION

More than fifty years have passed since A Passage to India was first published in 1924. Since then it has been generally recognized as a modern classic and innumerable studies and criticisms of it have been made from various points of view. The following passage shows clearly how various these criticisms are.

The range of emphases has been extraordinarily wide. Some critics have seen it as eminently a social comedy, others as a religious novel. Some have seen it as very much a novel of a traditional type. . . ; others have seen it as eminently a modernist or symbolist novel. Some critics have seen it as a statement of twentieth-century liberal hope, a novel

T. Ikeda

about the joining together of faiths, creeds and races; others have seen it as a profound statement of twentieth-century despair and nihilism (1).

The last two sentences bring out in striking contrast the difference between the positive or optimistic side and the negative or pessimistic side in Forster's criticism. It is my opinion that this tendency proves that this is a very full, varied, and the richest novel in which Forster's messages are everywhere. The variety of opinions depends on which message one regards as the most important.

We are constantly exposed to Western criticism, especially English and American, but I have always wondered how the Indian people react to this novel of which the setting is India herself. And I have a keen interest in which message is the most important to the Indian critics. Two books recently published satisfied my desire to learn this Indian point of view. (2) Reading these books, I felt a very close feeling to the Indian view and the Oriental way of thinking. The present essay will be concerned with the most controversial question: "Is there any solution to this chaotic, muddled society?", referring specifically to the Indian view.

I

It is well-known that the title of this novel is derived from Walt Whitman's poem "Passage to India." Vasant A. Shahne points out the difference between Forster's and Whitman's vision. He says, "Whereas Walt Whitman seeks a synthesis between the scientific achievements of civilization (such as the Suez Canal or American railroads) and man's religious and spiritual quest symbolized by a passage to India and more than India, E. M. Forster as a novelist seeks to blend human reality with transcendent reality, man's ex-

A Passage to India

perience in the Indian setting with his quest for ultimate truth." (3) Another Indian critic, G. Nageswara Rao, whose view impressed me strongly makes this comment: "Only when Forster depicts man's alienation and his struggle to regain his oneness with the universe do we find the universality of particular themes." (4) Almost all the Indian essays have a strong emphasis on Forster's quest for ultimate truth.

On a purely narrative level, this story is primarily presented with the theme of friendship and love. In Chapter 2, Aziz and his friends, Hamidullah and Mahmood Ali, were discussing as to whether or not it would be possible to be friends with an Englishman. (p. 12) The last scene of the novel is thus; Aziz and Fielding riding horses, say "Why can't we be friends now? Said the other, holding him affectionately, 'It's what I want. It's what you want. But the horses didn't want it. . .they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices, 'No, not yet,' and the sky said, 'No, not there.' (p. 317) (5)

Aziz and Fielding tried to overcome the gulf between East and West through understanding, but finally these attempts end in failure as shown in the last scene. This view leads us to a very pessimistic and nihilistic idea.

However, as stated before, my main concern is not on the narrative level but on the symbolic level, that is, "man's struggle to regain his oneness with the universe." Consequently, the most important scene is in the "Caves" part of the novel, which is also the most symbolical. Forster himself puts the greatest value on the Caves in the structural and thematic pattern.

Caves represented an area in which concentration takes place. A cavity. They were something to focus everything up; they were to engender an event like an egg. (6)

Therefore, the Caves are at the very heart of the novel and they touch the core of the problem of reality and illusion for the liberal humanists who are too rational to comprehend the irrationality of life. Adella, Fielding, and Mrs. Moore are the central figures in this essay.

II

From the very beginning of this novel, there are suggestions of the importance of the Marabar Caves.

Except for the Marabar Caves, the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary . . . The very wood seems made of mud, the inhabitants of mud moving. . . it shares nothing with the city except the overarching sky. The sky settles everything. (pp. 9-10)

This passage gives a striking contrast between the ordered, geometrical district of the English and the Indian city of unholy muddle. The life-sustaining and life-denying landscape of Forster's India defies man's instinct for order and form. The very mud that cakes Chandrapore seems suggestive of muddle. Therefore, the word "muddle" is the key word to comprehend the theme of this novel and it is the Caves that are the most muddling landscape.

Then what happened to the central figures in the Cave? The story of the caves is rather ambiguous, but the influence and the disturbance to the Western humanists, Mrs. Moore, Adela, and Fielding is clearly explained. J.S. Martin (7) classified the characters into two groups; one is Prof. Godbole, Aziz, and Fielding, who are sure of their spiritual values and not muddled. The other is Mrs. Moore

A Passage to India

and Adela, who are undergoing a spiritual crisis and muddled. But I think Fielding belongs to the latter group of Western minds and he is also muddled. The conversation at Fielding's bridge party quoted here is very suggestive of how these people will be changed through the experience in the Caves.

'I do so hate mysteries,' Adela announced.

'We English do.'

'I dislike them not because I'm English, but from my own personal point of view.' she corrected.

'I like mysteries but I rather dislike muddles,' said Mrs. Moore.

'Do you think so Mrs. Fielding?'

'A mystery is only a high-sounding term for a muddle. No advantage in stirring it up, in either case. Aziz and I know well that India's a muddle.'

'India's--Oh, what an alarming idea!' (p. 68)

This brief discussion foretells their encounter with the Marabar Caves. Understandably, as Adela herself declares, she likes mystery, for mystery by definition baffles the rational understanding and violates her belief that everything, in theory at least, is comprehensible. Mrs. Moore, on the other hand, dislikes muddle, which violates her vision of an orderly Christian cosmos. In fact, the India that Forster describes, however, is both muddled and mysterious.

Just after this conversation, they discuss the excursion to the Marabar Caves. They want to know about the Caves, but even Prof. Godbole can't give a clear explanation of them. After much oscillation, the excursion takes place. On a purely narrative level, Mrs. Moore and Adela Queste board the train to visit the Marabar Caves. Godbole's delayed prayers result in Fielding and the Brahmin's missing this train. They are held up at the level crossing; they gesticulate and Aziz shouts at Fielding: "'Bad, bad, you have

destroyed me.' 'Godbole's pujah did it,' cried the Englishman (p. 130). The element of chance plays its part in the Marabar episode. It contributes to its comic confusion, its muddle. Mrs. Moore entered the cave and "lost Aziz and Adela in the dark." However, the operation of chance is extremely limited and Forster uses it only to deepen the effect of suspense. This view of Nageswara Rao leads to the conclusion that the Marabar episode is in part a muddle, and in part a mystery.

Next, I will explain what changes Adela, Mrs. Moore and Fielding undergo through their experience in the caves, quoting the text.

Adela for the first time realizes where she stands. "The discovery had come so suddenly that she felt like a mountaineer whose rope had broke." Not to love the man one's going to marry! Not to find out till this moment! Not ever to have asked oneself the question till now!" (p. 150) Through this experience, "She was no longer examining life, but being examined by it; she had become a real person." (p. 238)

For Mrs. Moore, the experience in the caves, particularly the echo, began in some way to undermine her hold on life. She feels that "pathos, piety, courage--they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists, nothing has value. If one had spoken vileness in that place, or quoted lofty poetry, the comment would have been the same--'ouboum.' If one had spoken with the tongues of angels and pleaded for all the unhappiness and misunderstanding in the world, past, present, and to come, for all the misery men must undergo whatever their opinion and position, and however much they dodge or bluff--it would amount to the same." (p. 147)

Fielding, who comes late to the caves, receives no

A Passage to India

direct impression but after the event he said a very different thing than before. "And he felt dubious and discontented suddenly, and wondered whether he was really and truly successful as a human being. After forty years' experience he had learnt to manage his life and make the best of it on advanced European lines, had developed his personality, explored his limitations, controlled his passions--and he had done it all without becoming either pedantic or worldly. A creditable achievement, but as the moment passed, he felt he ought to have been working at something else the whole time--he didn't know at what, never would know, never could know, and that was why he felt sad." (p. 187)

From a naturalistic explanation, Mrs. Moore, Adela, and Fielding, and of course, Aziz, fell into a very miserable state. Adela "got a sun-stroke and went mad" and because of her hallucination, Aziz was arrested. Two friendships, one between Mrs. Moore and Aziz, another between Fielding and Aziz, disintegrated. Mrs. Moore is suffering from 'spiritual muddledom' (p. 208) and dies in despair.

But, on the other hand, from a supernaturalistic explanation, in other words, symbolically, for the individual, the entrance into the cave is the beginning of each thinking of themselves and questioning the very fundamentals of their life. They are forced to face the dilemma stemming from the awareness of the inadequacy of rationality and their own imperfection. Forster uses the Caves, the symbol of India, as an appropriate means to suggest our existential predicament--that we are too rational to give up rationality, but we are also rational enough to glimpse something beyond. His best presentation of the Indian physical and philosophical landscape may be this: India is the country, fields, fields, then hills, jungle, hills, and more fields. . .

T. Ikeda

How can the mind take hold of such a country? Generations of invaders have tried, but they remain in exile. The important towns they build are only retreats, their quarrels the malaise of men who cannot find their way home. India knows of their trouble. She knows of the whole world's trouble, to its uttermost depth. She calls 'come' through her hundred mouths, through objects ridiculous and august. But come to what? She has never defined--She is not a promise, only an appeal. (p. 135) The Marabar Caves

are older than all spirits. There is something unspeakable in these outposts. They are like nothing else in the world, and a glimpse of them makes the breath catch. . . He finds it difficult to discuss the caves, or to keep them apart in mind, for the pattern never varies, and no carving, not even a bees' nest or a bat, distinguishes one from another. Nothing, nothing attaches to them, and their reputation--for they have one--does not depend upon human speech. (p. 123-24)

Here we have to remember the conversation at the Fielding tea party quoted before. Only Mrs. Moore who says, "I like mysteries" captured the essential meaning of the caves. This perspective is clearly analyzed in G.O. Allen's thesis (8). For her India was a mystery, inscrutable perhaps, but certainly not confused, disorderly, purposeless.

But Adela and Fielding are not able to understand what happened in the cave completely. They are too rational to accept such an irrational explanation. The evening when the trial is over and her echo is gone, Adela and Fielding are sitting together. Forster describes them as this:

Were there worlds beyond which they could never touch, or did all that is possible enter their consciousness? They could not tell. They only realized that their outlook was more or less similar, and found in this satisfaction. Perhaps life is a mystery, not a muddle; they

A Passage to India

could not tell. Perhaps the hundred Indians which fuss and squabble so tiresomely are one, and the universe they mirror is one. They had not the apparatus for judging. (p. 256)

Though Fielding is disturbed by the experience of the caves and somehow begins to know the mysteriousness of life, he finds a great joy in the Mediterranean harmony, a symbol of the civilization that has escaped muddle, the reasonable form, when writing picture postcards to his Indian friends in Venice. But Forster's final comments show clearly the fact that he, himself, has more interest in Indian muddle and finds a clue to solve the inadequacy of reason. He says, 'Ah, India, who seems not to move, will go straight there while other nations waste their time.' (p. 289) Another comment is this--'this approaching triumph of India was a muddle (as we call it), a frustration of reason and form.' (p. 280) Thus, this seemingly contradictory statement that India herself is only real harmony!

III

While form creates and clarifies distinction--distinctions which are relative, temporary, misleading--muddle erases barriers and shows the interrelatedness of creation. (9) This message gives an answer to man's quest for the ultimate truth. In muddle, nothing is excepted and all things are meaningful or meaningless in being one. With man's imaginative power, not through mind, but through heart, even muddle can be turned into mystery which controls the elemental form of existence. This conclusion seems to very paradoxical, but Forster's art in this novel is also paradoxical. This novel is full of negative and muddling expressions, yet affirms strongly the positive meaning of life.

NOTES

1. Malcolm Bradbury, E. M. Forster: A Passage to India (London: Macmillan Press, 1970), p. 12.
2. V. A. Shahane, Ed., Focus on Forster's 'A Passage to India' (Bombay, Orient Longman, 1975).
V. A. Shahane, Ed., Approaches to E. M. Forster (New Delhi, Arnold-Heinemann, 1981).
3. V. A. Shahane, Ed., Focus on Forster's 'A Passage to India', p. 116.
4. Ibid., p. 26.
5. All page references are to Penguin edition of A Passage to India (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1936).
6. P. N. Furbank and F. J. H. Haskell, "An Interview with E. M. Forster, 'A Passage to India: A Selection of Critical Essays', ed. Malcolm Bradbury, p. 28.
7. J. S. Martin, E. M. Forster: The Endless Journey (Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976), p. 150.
8. G. O. Allen, 'Structure, Symbol and Theme in E. M. Forster's 'A Passage to India', in PMLA LXX (Dec. 1955), p. 949.
9. J. P. Levine, Creation and Criticism: 'A Passage to India', (London, Chatto & Windus, 1971), p. 180.

E. M. フォースター「インドへの道」の一考察

池 田 豊 子

E. M. フォースター作「インドへの道」は「現代の古典」としての評価を受け、様々な角度からの解釈が示されている。欧米人批評家は勿論、最近インド人による評論集も相次いで出版されている。ストーリー上のテーマは、イギリス人とインド人の真の理解は可能なのかということであるが、象徴的な面からみた時、この小説は、インドという特殊な地域を場面として現代の人間のかかえている合理精神の限界という問題を提起している。この論文は後者の立場から muddle, mystery という二つの言葉を分析することによって、その象徴的な意味を明らかにしようとするものである。